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ABSTRACT

Included in this paper is a sample of comments made by parents in response to the idea of instituting all-day, every-day kindergarten schedules in several suburban and small-town school districts in western New York. Those in favor of all-day programs emphasize that many children attending nursery schools and other programs are in need of a kindergarten experience that challenges them appropriately. Also mentioned are the needs many parents have for child care and the assistance that all-day kindergarten would provide in simplifying their lives. Comments from the opposing position emphasize either the fact that children are not ready for all-day sessions or that such a program would not represent the best use of their time. Comments also touch on such areas as the nature of local kindergarten programs and the offering of more than one type of kindergarten. (MP)

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MIDDLE-CLASS PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD ALL-DAY KINDERGARTEN

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MIDDLE-CLASS PARENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD ALL-DAY KINDERGARTEN

Recent discussion of the advisability of instituting all-day, every day kindergarten schedules has focused on the results of studies with disadvantaged children and speculation about the possible impact of more schooling on academic achievement (Naron, 1981). Since middle-class parents are quite concerned with school success it might be expected that they would be strongly in favor of all-day kindergartens. When asked, however, a significant number of them indicate that they do not favor such a change.

Evidence for this generalization comes from the results of board of education surveys in several suburban and small-town school districts in Western New York. While school finances were a factor in these systems' decisions not to adopt all-day kindergartens, an important aspect of the at times heated discussions was consideration of such matters as children's needs, the instructional program, and the role of day care in the educational system.

In three of the districts involved surveys of families with young children were conducted. In one case, of 505 respondents, 40 per cent judged the all-day alternative unacceptable (Amherst, New York, Schools, 1980). In a second district with 414 respondents, 30 per cent opposed any change from the existing half-day schedule (Grand Island, New York, Schools, 1980). Another district with 159 families surveyed found 40 per cent preferring the half-day kindergarten and most of that group opposed to any change (Fredonia, New York, Schools, 1980).

It appears, then, that in school districts serving middle-class populations a decision to inaugurate all-day kindergartens will be resisted by a rather large number of the parents most directly involved. A sample of the comments made by parents in response to the school surveys mentioned provides some of the flavor of their opinions.

PARENT COMMENTS

Comments of parents ranged widely, encompassing many of the arguments that have appeared in print and were made at open meetings in the districts concerned. Those in favor of all-day programs emphasized that many children were attending nursery schools and other programs and were in need of a kindergarten experience which challenged them appropriately. Also mentioned were the needs many parents have for child care and the assistance that all-day kindergarten would provide in simplifying their lives. Comments on the other side emphasized that children either were not ready for all-day sessions or that such a program would not represent the best use of their time. Those in the negative were aware of the situation of working parents but many specifically objected to it as an argument for all-day kindergarten. Comments also touched on such areas as the nature of local kindergarten programs and the offering of more than one type of kindergarten.

Comments favoring all day kindergarten:

On the Issue of Children's Needs

> It has been my experience (I have two older children) that if a child has had exposure to nursery school they are in all likelihood ready for an all-day kindergarten program.
>
> I personally feel that sending a child to school for two and one-half hours is not worth the effort. I feel that half-day programs are appropriate for nursery school and not kindergarten.

I really favor a full-day program because my pre-kindergartener already attends school for the same number of hours as a five year old and enjoys it!

My child, as many others these days, is learning so much earlier and faster. After two years of nursery school I feel she's ready for a full day. In a half-day program, the children are bussed and seem to spend more time on the bus than in school. A full day seems worth their time.

My daughter, as with many children, attends a nursery day care center. She has demonstrated an ability to handle the academic work, socializing, and responsibilities of a full and active day. I am afraid that any program that is less than what she is currently exposed to will perhaps be boring and/or frustrating.

My daughter is a bit tired at the end of the day, but she loves the program in an all-day kindergarten and is making good progress in pre-reading and pre-math.

A full day of Kindergarten can be such an advantage for the child. There could be more time for play as well as more opportunity for learning experiences. I personally feel that this opportunity would fully benefit the child.

It seems children have to know so much more to enter kindergarten and start first grade. This way the teachers can spend more time with the children, help them learn more, and find out the few who may have trouble in first grade. Two hours of kindergarten today is just not enough.

We do not feel that the current 2½ hour day program is meeting the needs of eager to learn 5 year old children. The majority of learning takes place in a child's first 5 years. It is our responsibility as parents and yours as a public school system to expose our children to as many learning experiences as can be realized.

It's much better for little kids to get out and be with children their own ages, instead of being with the mother the whole day long.

The issue of child care was important to many

Due to the increase in working mothers and the difficulty in finding quality child care, the option of all day is extremely important.

I would like his kindergarten year to be a smooth one. The idea of his going to one place for kindergarten, then somewhere else for day care upsets me. I don't want him to feel he is being shuffled around.

My husband and I moved to this neighborhood because of the school and were disappointed in the half-day program because of my working.

A full-day Kindergarten would be a "blessing" as I am a single working mother. My Kindergartener could walk home and be supervised by my older child, saving our strained budget from collapse. Please, please help us.

My child is very intelligent and active, but there are no children his age in our neighborhood. Also, I could work more if he were able to be cared for at school instead of a sitter or day care center for almost my whole pay. My son loves school but I cannot afford his day care center more than one day a week.

I have mixed feelings but if it was available I'm sure I would send my child. With a family where two parents work, full day would be ideal. I myself do not work now, but with rising costs who knows what I'll be doing in two years.

I work outside the home full time. If an all day kindergarten is not available, I will probably have to enroll my son in a private or parochial kindergarten when the time comes.

Some respondents favoring the all-day plan directly attacked existing kindergarten offerings or were implicitly critical of them

I feel that children with nursery school experiences are ready for more than the present kindergarten "socialization" program.

My child is more than ready for a full day of learning (not arts and crafts for two hours a day)! Very interested in a school which has a heavy emphasis on reading readiness.

I think an educational program should really be emphasized rather than length of day simply because most 3-5 year olds do have pre-kindergarten experience. Therefore, I believe a 6-hour day can really develop an educational background whereas you cannot get much education in 2½ hours. Also, most children are now bored in the kindergarten program.

Five-year olds today are ready for longer days and enriched programs. Our nursery school offers more than present Kindergarten programs in some ways.

I feel a full-day kindergarten would be appropriate for my child only if the curriculum were updated to meet her needs. I have reservations about extending kindergarten hours if accelerated programs are not employed. Adding extra hours of play is just using your valuable facilities and faculty for "babysitting".

The public school kindergarten should be a full day so that more learning can take place. It seems that only playtime and socialization skills are taking place now. Not enough challenge at this time--perhaps a better curriculum could be provided in a full day program.

My older daughter found the kindergarten program that we have now very repetitious and therefore not as challenging as it could have been. This was because she had attended nursery school and had previously covered much of the material. Also years of Sesame Street had taught her a lot of the basic material covered in the short amount of time allotted for kindergarten. My daughter attending kindergarten next September is in the identical situation.

Comments opposing all-day Kindergarten:

On the issue of children's needs

We feel that kindergarten is a big change in a child's life and should be approached gradually at first. After all, they still have 11 years left of full-time schooling.

I think that although a full day kindergarten would be a blessing for all working mothers, I don't think it would be in the best interests of a child who, perhaps emotionally, is not ready to accept a full-day away from the home.

A full day will do more to disrupt the children than educate them. Most five-year olds are emotionally as well as physically too immature for a full day of school, five days a week.

I believe that half-day kindergarten is far more beneficial than full-day. We are dealing with very young children and the full day at school would be too lengthy in my opinion. What I appreciated most about half-day was the fact that I was able to give my kindergarten child the attention he needed while my other son was still in school.

I can understand why a full-day kindergarten has some benefits, but I really believe we try to make our children grow up too fast. Our society has so many pressures that I really feel that one more year of letting our children be "children" can only benefit them.

I feel children are too young yet for an all-day kindergarten. Let them have their childhood.

We think a half-day program is adequate for a 5-year old child. A full-day program is too long and too tiring.

We feel the ½ day is important to child's adjustment to school.

Kindergarten is supposed to be a preparation for primary grades. I feel this is best attained gradually if a positive attitude toward school is to be fostered. Working parents are looking for a program to fit their needs but what about the child?

Some comments related to child care were quite negative

I have strong feelings that an all-day program would be for the parents' convenience and not the child's best interests. If they are unwilling to assume responsibility for their children they should seek out a day care program. Public education was not intended to replace parenting.

Many working mothers will obviously recommend this all-day kindergarten to use as a babysitter. This is no reason to explore a new educational program. We feel a 5-year old child is not ready to spend 6 hours in school and spend it productively which is the purpose of their being there.

I also feel strongly that my children should not suffer just to provide day-care or a head start on an "aggressive, must succeed at all cost" type of lifestyle for others.

I do not feel 5-year old children are emotionally ready for a full-day program, nor wish my school tax money to be used for what would actually be half-kindergarten and half day-care.

If working mothers want babysitting then it should be after school and charged extra to those who want it!

I do not believe that the schools should go into the babysitting service just to make it easier on the working parent.

Those opposing a move to all-day Kindergarten also took the opportunity to make program-related observations of a general nature

I don't feel that the school is the only place where my child's development takes place. The additional educational benefits I feel are minimal in an all-day program. The increase in cost may not justify the limited educational benefits, if any.

I do feel that there could be less play in kindergarten during a half day session and more learning so the children are better prepared for the regimentation of first grade.

My main concern is not how much time the children spend in school, but how the time is used. If the child were to spend

(Continued on next page)

a six-hour day in kindergarten, I would want that time to be creatively spent. Kindergarten should still be Kindergarten and not a first grade.

How about some time outside (daylight time) for kids to be just kids. Nothing like starting a kid off hating school by making him stay all day.

If all-day were for all children, the teacher might not have enough time to expand her program for the enrichment of students who were ready for more advanced work, but would have to help those not ready to adjust to a long day only.

Teacher and program are my first concern--length of day is secondary.

It would be inappropriate if the program becomes too structured. My child needs to mingle with children in his age group, learn how to play with others, and how to share. Keep Kindergarten curriculum the way it is--just lengthen the day. Give children freedom to do what interests them.

Other Comments

Even parents who were also teachers disagreed

Favoring:

I teach in a school system that has full day kindergarten. It seems to work well for most of the students.

At this time, it would seem that our child is going to be ready to attend kindergarten on a full-day basis; however, our feelings about this may change by the time she is of that age. As a teacher of primary-age children, I feel that a full-day kindergarten may be too much for some children. On the other hand, for those who are ready, I feel it should be available.

We have a half-day pre-kindergarten and a full-day kindergarten (where I teach). These programs appear to have significantly improved achievement in the primary grades. The children are enthusiastic about school and appear to be very happy.

Opposing:

As a first grade teacher I can understand the philosophy of a full day kindergarten but I also realize not all children could cope with this type of program because of maturity or ability.

As a teacher and mother I question the real reason for consideration of all-day kindergarten--teachers' jobs, parental pressures, etc. We work with too many children who have been overexposed to group situations before they reach the age of five. Even the most ready, mature children thrive with small groups, personal attention.

I am a "retired" school teacher having left teaching primarily to care for my daughter. I have great respect for my new career as a mother and believe in this role very strongly as a necessary factor and influence in children's lives, especially their early childhood.

I work in a school where the only option is all-day kindergarten; I feel, as do the kindergarten teachers, that the day is too long.

Some school administrators and teachers' unions may be concerned that, if all-day Kindergarten isn't available, parents will enroll their children in private schools and then leave them there in subsequent years. The surveys turned up "threats" from both sides of the aisle.

A half-day kindergarten as it stands now means finding full-day care for the other half day for working mothers like myself or, as I will probably do, find an all-day private kindergarten. My child is used to an all-day school already.

If a full day is not available, next year, I intend to enroll him in a full day program elsewhere.

I will have to enroll my child in private kindergarten if a long and involved enough day is not available when she is ready in two years. She already does many of the requirements for entry into kindergarten now!

My son is only 17 months, but due to our changing lifestyles an all-day kindergarten would be beneficial to the children and parents. I know that many of my neighbors sent their children to St. B's because it was the only school that had an all-day kindergarten.

Would strongly consider not sending my child to public schools if all-day kindergarten is initiated.

If there is not a half-day kindergarten, I will send my child to a private school where there is a half-day program offered.

If the Committee recommends full sessions I would lobby against it and would go to private or parochial kindergarten.

Optional all-day classes were mentioned in surveys as were classes that were somewhat longer but not a full day

There are many 5-year olds who can barely tolerate 2½ hours per day. I feel the parents should be able to decide if half-day or full-day is suitable.

An all-day program would be fine for older kindergarteners, but not for all due to exhaustion from length of day.

I feel all-day kindergarten should only be by parental choice.

At-home moms should have a choice between all day and half day.

I oppose, vigorously, the longer kindergarten. I feel that half a day is enough for a five year old. But I will not interfere if someone else wants it for their child.

I would like to see an extended day program for kindergarten, possibly add on an hour or two hours to the day. I question a full day for all children--some simply wouldn't be ready.

Full-day kindergarten is fine, but I think it would be even better if the kids can start with the current half-day program for a certain period of time. Thereafter, start the full program.

DISCUSSION

The surveys did not lead to any easy resolution of the controversy. With a substantial number of the families most involved opposed and beset by the usual budgetary pressures, school boards did not move to adopt all-day kindergartens for all children. Such possibilities as optional programs, school-related day care, and the availability of pre-kindergarten classes were discussed.

Two districts did consider specific plans for program modification. One added an hour to the kindergarten morning schedule and abolished afternoon sessions, making kindergarten teaching a part-time position. Another considered offering parents a choice between half-day and full-day schedules but finally decided to stay with the half-day plan.

Flexibility such as the offering of a choice does seem called for if school systems serving middle-class families are to be responsive on this issue. There simply is not enough evidence on which to base decisions (Hatcher and Schmidt, 1980). While some observers conclude that the case

for all day kindergartens has been made (Naron, 1981), others call for not just retention of the half-day format but the institution of half-day first grades (Mulrain and Ames, 1979). And, of course, the argument has been continually advanced that formal school activities should be postponed until children are approximately eight years of age (Moore and Moore, 1975).

Thus, flexibility on the part of school districts would not only mean that parents would be likely to find within the tax-supported system the kind of offering that appealed to them, but also that various approaches would be available for study and analysis of outcomes.

But flexibility has been a scarce commodity in the educational system. Perhaps wisdom, sensitivity and a concern for the viability of the public schools will now combine to change that climate in significant ways.

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